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CANDLEMAS

by

HAROLD RILEY



SEASONS TRACTS

No. 4

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Candlemas Day

THE feast that is popularly known as Candlemas Day (February 2) has generally been known in the Western Church as the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary; in the East it is called the "Meeting" (that is, of Simeon and Anna with the Infant Christ); and in the Prayer-Book it is given as "The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, commonly called the Purification of Saint Mary the Virgin." The popular name of "Candlemas" comes from the ceremonies of the blessing of candles on this day, the origin of which is now lost in some obscurity.

The observance of the feast goes back to the fourth century at Jerusalem. There however it was kept, not as now forty days after Christmas Day, but on February 15, forty days after the Epiphany, which was still observed as a celebration of our Lord's Birth. From Jerusalem, the observance spread in the East, and in A.D. 542 it began to be kept at Constantinople. By A.D. 700 (according to Dom G. Dix in "The Shape of the Liturgy" p. 358) it was in use at Rome, but as a feast of our Lord rather than of his Mother. In Gaul, it acquired its name of "the Purification," and its observance as a feast of our Lady.

Already, while the feast was celebrated on February 15, it had associated with it the candle-procession with which we are familiar, and this is now so strictly regarded as being proper to this day as the close of the Christmas season that even when the feast is transferred to another date, the procession still takes place on February 2.

The Presentation in the Temple

The story of the Presentation in the Temple is one of the seven sections of the introduction to St. Luke's Gospel (chapters i and ii), all of which deal

with the "Gospel of the Infancy." In this account (ii. 22-40) St. Luke tells us how according to the rule of the Jewish religion, which prescribed that every first-born son should be presented to God after forty days, Mary brought the Infant Jesus from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. At the temple, a sacrifice had to be offered, which was to be "a lamb of the first year for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon, or a turtledove, for a sin offering," or if the mother could not afford a lamb "then she shall bring two turtles, or two young pigeons" (Lev. xii. 6, 8). Mary, the humble Maid of Nazareth, therefore brought her two doves or pigeons to the Temple.

At Jerusalem was an old man named Simeon. He was among the devout number who looked for "the consolation of Israel," as Zacharias and Elisabeth, and Mary herself, had done. In spite of his great age, Simeon believed that God would not let him die before he saw the Christ of God come to his people. Now his faith was justified, for he came into the temple, and seeing the holy Child, recognised by a divine inspiration that this was the Christ, and taking him into his arms, blessed God, saying the words that the Church has since adopted in its worship as the *Nunc Dimittis*—the Song of Simeon. Then he spoke to Mary, prophesying that many would fall and rise up in Israel because of her Son, and that a sword would pass through her own heart because of him.

Into the temple came also Anna, an aged prophetess. It is not certain what St. Luke means us to understand of her age; she was "a widow of four score and four years," and perhaps this means that her actual age was eighty-four, not that she had lived eighty-four years since her husband's death. She too gave thanks to God when she saw the Child Jesus, and spoke of him to others who looked "for the redemption of Israel." So Mary offered her sacrifice, and took her infant Son away from his Father's house.

The Candlemas Ceremonies

The Candlemas ceremonies celebrate our Lord as the Light of the World, as Simeon proclaimed. He is "a Light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of his people Israel." On this day, before the sacrifice of the altar is offered, the priest puts on a purple cope (for there is a penitential note in the ceremonies before Mass, perhaps coming from the days when the Church had to witness against pagan excesses), and blesses the candles placed near the altar. Five prayers are said, reminding us of the events of this day, and praying that we may be illuminated in our souls by the light of Christ. Then the candles are distributed, while Simeon's Song is sung. Before it, and after each verse, is sung the refrain "A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel." Then after a Collect the *Procession* follows, all who take part in it bearing lighted candles in their hands, while the ancient Anthems that originally came from the worship of the Eastern Church are sung. The procession, when it is possible, goes out of the Church; and on entering it again another short chant is sung.

So the purple vestments are laid aside, and the white ones of rejoicing are put on, for the Mass of the feast to begin.

The Mass of the Purification

The Mass begins with the *Introit* from Psalm 48: "Great is the Lord and highly to be praised: in the city of our God, even upon his holy hill." Before and after this, the antiphon from the same Psalm speaks in words that must have been dear to Simeon himself, "We wait for thy loving kindness, O God, in the midst of thy temple." The aged Saint waited indeed at the temple at Jerusalem, and was not disappointed; we now wait in the temples of the Christian Church, and in our turn we meet the Saviour of the world.

The theme of purity comes in the *Collect*, in which we pray that as God's only-begotten Son was

presented in the temple, so we may ourselves, through him, be presented with pure and clean hearts. The words of the Beatitude come to our minds : "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Instead of an Epistle from the New Testament, there follows a *Lesson* from the prophet Malachi (iii. 1-5). In it, the prophet foretells that "the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple," as our Saviour did on this day. Because of this, Malachi urges the need for purity. It may be, according to ancient rites, that Christ needed to be presented to God, and his all-pure Mother purified, but in very truth it is Christ who "is like a refiner's fire," and who will "purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver," for the very priests of the temple are not pure in his sight. In humility and obedience, Mary brings her Son to fulfil the ancient law, yet it is her Son who is the source of all holiness, and the supreme Law-giver ; while she is herself the "pure virgin" whom the Holy Spirit came upon as a living temple of God.

After the Lesson is sung the *Gradual*, repeating again the words of Psalm 48 sung at the Introit, with the Alleluia-verse containing a Christian comment, "The old man carried the Child ; yet was that Child the old man's King." If the feast falls after Septuagesima, after which we do not sing our Alleluias until Easter, the Alleluia-verse is replaced by the singing of the *Nunc Dimittis* as what is called the *Tract*.

Then follows the *Gospel* (St. Luke ii. 22-40) the contents of which have already been described. At this account of the presentation of our Lord, all hold lighted candles again, filling the Church with the light that has come from the altar of God.

At the *Offertory* is sung the anthem : "Full of grace are thy lips," from Psalm 45. The words remind us both of our divine Lord, of whom we are told in the Gospel "the grace of God was upon

him," and also of his Mother, saluted by the Angel at the Incarnation as "full of grace."

Before the Sanctus, the *Preface* of Christmas is sung, since this is the close of Christmastide; at the words of the Benedictus, "Blessed is he that cometh," we may recall how when later in life, our Lord came again to Jerusalem, the crowds welcomed him with these words on their lips.

From the beginning of the Canon of the Mass until the Communion, the candles are again held lighted, for now indeed is Christ with us in his eucharistic presence, "the Lord in the midst of the temple." At the *Communion-anthem*, we are again reminded of the Gospel record, "It was revealed unto Simeon by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ."

Other Services

We may notice two other ways in which the events of this day have affected our religious life. The Song of Simeon was early adopted as the Canticle for the evening office of Compline; and when the English services of the Prayer-Book were drawn up, it was appointed as the second of the two Canticles at Evensong. Just as Simeon was willing to "depart in peace" at the evening of his life, having seen the light of Christ, so at the evening of each day we also can gladly depart in peace, having been enlightened by the same Lord. Our eyes, even more truly than Simeon's, have seen God's salvation, for we have known the truth of the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, of his Resurrection and Ascension, of his glory in heaven, and his abiding with his Church on earth.

The other Christian custom is that popularly known as *Churching*; the custom of women coming after childbirth to give thanks to God and to receive his blessing. The same thankfulness and devotion that led Mary to the temple, leads Christian mothers to wish to praise God in his house, and to "wait for his loving-kindness in the midst of the temple" for

their little ones.

The Light of Christ

Christ our Saviour is "the Light of the world." The truth that he has revealed is a light in the darkness that would otherwise engulf us. Even before his Incarnation, the Son of God was "the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world," and the source of every true inspiration. His word, now revealed to us, is "a lantern unto our feet and a light unto our paths," and he himself has promised "he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." In heaven above, the book of the Revelation tells us, God and the Lamb "are the light thereof." Into that light nothing impure can come (Rev. xxi. 27), and if we are not to be afraid of the light, as are those whose deeds are evil, we must seek for cleansing from him who is to purge away all sin.

We must "cast off the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light" (Romans xiii. 12) for our Lord has said to us in our turn, "Ye are the light of the world," and as members of his Body we are to be the means by which the light of Christ shines in the darkness of this world.

To do this means a humility and dependence on God, of which the example is given in the devotion of our Lord's Mother. Our recourse to the house of God does not entail the difficulties that it held for her, when she had to go to Jerusalem. The Christian law is in many ways less onerous than was the Jewish law which she obeyed. But after her example, and aided by her prayers, we can learn so to wait on God's loving-kindness in the midst of his temple, that we can go from it enlightened and refreshed, bearing as it were the lighted candle we have received at the altar to "give light to all that are in the house" of human life, so that our light may so shine before men that they may see our good works, and glorify our Father which is in heaven.